

# t8code - modular adaptive mesh refinement in the exascale era

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## Summary

In this paper, we present our scalable dynamic adaptive mesh refinement (AMR) library t8code, which was officially released in 2022 (Holke et al., 2022). t8code is written in C/C++, open source, and readily available at [dlr-amr.github.io/t8code](https://dlr-amr.github.io/t8code). It is developed and maintained at the Institute for Software Technology of the German Aerospace Center (DLR). AMR is a widely used method of locally adapting the mesh resolution according to an adequate error indicator in grid-based applications – especially in the context of computational fluid dynamics. Our software library provides fast and memory efficient parallel algorithms for dynamic AMR to handle tasks such as mesh adaptation, load-balancing, ghost computation, feature search and more. t8code can manage meshes with over one trillion mesh elements (Holke et al., 2021) and scales up to one million parallel processes (Holke, 2018). It is intended to be used as mesh management backend in scientific and engineering simulation codes paving the way towards high-performance applications of the upcoming exascale era.

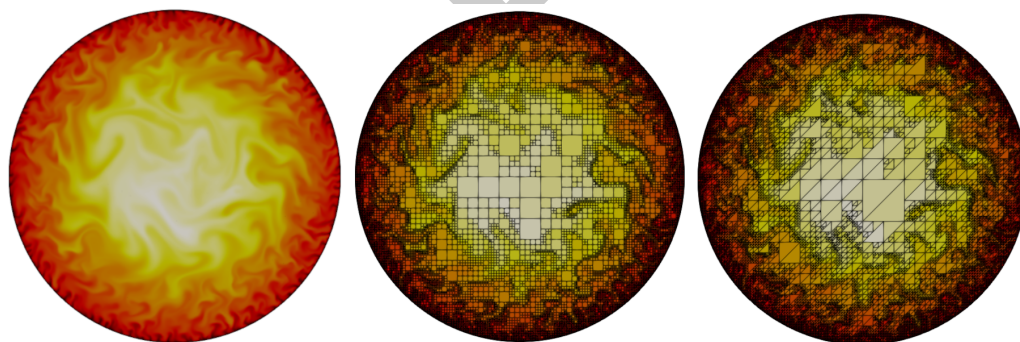
## Statement of Need

Adaptive Mesh Refinement has been established as a successful approach for scientific and engineering simulations over the past decades (Babuvška & Rheinboldt, 1978; Bangerth et al., 2007; Dörfler, 1996; Teunissen & Keppens, 2019). By modifying the mesh resolution locally according to problem specific indicators, the computational power is efficiently concentrated where needed and the overall memory usage is reduced by orders of magnitude. However, managing adaptive meshes and associated data is a very challenging task, especially for parallel codes. Implementing fast and scalable AMR routines generally leads to a large development overhead motivating the need for external mesh management libraries like t8code. Our libraries target audience are scientists and application developers working on grid-based simulation and visualization frameworks who are looking for a comprehensive and versatile mesh management solution. Besides offering AMR we also aim to lower the threshold to parallelize their codes by solely interacting with t8code's API. Alternative AMR libraries with a similar range of features are p4est (Burstedde et al., 2011a), libMesh (Kirk et al., 2006), ParaMesh (MacNeice et al., 2000), and SAMRAI (Gunney, 2013).

In contrast to the other AMR solutions, only t8code natively supports recursive refinement on a wide range of element types: vertices, lines, quadrilaterals, triangles, hexahedra, tetrahedra, prisms, and pyramids. Additionally, extensions to other refinement patterns and element shapes

are straightforwardly supported due to t8codes modular code structure and clear distinction between low- and high-level mesh operations (Holke et al., 2023). Application developers usually interact with t8code via a callback interface. This gives our AMR solution an unique position in the market catering for a wide range of use cases. Currently, t8code is optimized for grid-based applications using face-to-face connectivity between elements, such as Finite-Volume and Discontinuous Galerkin methods. In the future, we plan to support node-to-node connectivity and hanging nodes resolution to further increase the range of applications, such as Finite Element methods. More information on t8codes feature set and on how to include it in an application can be found in (Holke et al., 2023).

See Figure 1 for an exemplary adapted mesh managed by t8code using two different element types: quads and triangles. Shown is the temperature profile of a convection simulation of a model planet's mantle (source: Institute of Planetary Research, DLR). The original, uniform mesh consists of over 158 million quad cells allocating 6.818 GB of memory. By applying AMR to the data the memory usage could be reduced down to 20% with an compression error of less than 1%. The error measure was chosen to be the norm of the variance between refinement resp. coarsening steps. That is, starting from the uniform mesh at highest refinement level ( $l = 8$ ), the mesh was successively coarsened till the disagreement from the original data reached 1%. It should be noted that t8code's primary objective is to provide flexible adaptive mesh management. The layout of the data inside an element and its interpretation regarding, for example, when and how to refine/coarsen is up to the application.



**Figure 1:** Visualization of a planetary mantle convection simulation (source: Institute of Planetary Research, DLR). Shown is the 2D slice of the temperature profile. Left: original uniform data. The highlighting of the grid lines was omitted for visual clarity. Middle: adapted mesh with quad elements. Right: adapted mesh with triangle elements. The original data living on a uniform quad mesh was first transferred to a triangle mesh and adapted afterwards. This shows the versatility of t8code regarding to the choice of mesh elements.

## Fundamental Concepts

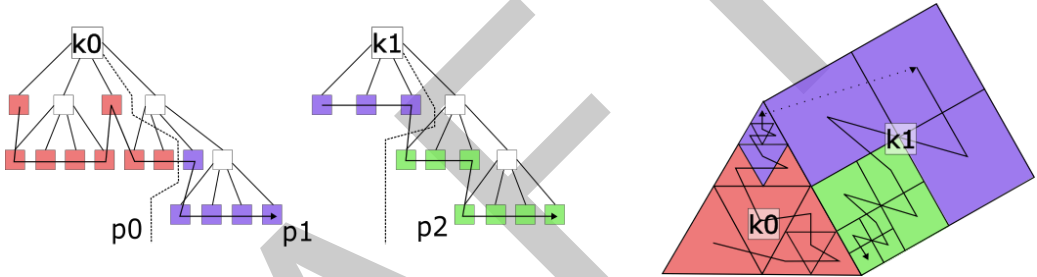
t8code is based on the forest-of-trees approach. Starting point for the usage of t8code is an unstructured conformal input mesh, which we denote a coarse mesh. This coarse mesh describes the geometry of the computational domain. Each of the coarse mesh cells is then viewed as the root of a refinement tree. These trees are refined recursively in a structured pattern, resulting in a collection of trees, which we call a forest. t8code stores only a minimal amount of information about the finest elements of the mesh - the leaves of the trees - in order to reconstruct the whole forest.

By enumerating the leaves in a recursive refinement pattern we obtain a space-filling curve (SFC) logic. Via these SFCs, all elements in a refinement tree are assigned an integer-based index and are stored in linear order. Element coordinates or element neighbors do not need to be stored explicitly but can be reconstructed from the SFC index. Fast bitwise SFC operations ensure optimal runtimes and diminish the need for memory lookups. Moreover, the SFC is

75 used to distribute the forest mesh across multiple processes, so that each process only stores a  
76 unique portion of the SFC. See [Figure 2](#).

77 While being successfully applied to quadrilateral and hexahedral meshes ([Burstedde et al.,](#)  
78 [2011b](#); [Weinzierl, 2019](#)), these SFC techniques are extended by t8code in a modular fashion,  
79 such that arbitrary element shapes are supported. We achieve this modularity through a novel  
80 decoupling approach that separates high-level (mesh global) algorithms from low-level (element  
81 local) implementations. All high-level algorithms can be applied to different implementations  
82 of element shapes and refinement patterns. A mix of different element shapes in the same  
83 mesh is also supported.

84 Mesh adaptation as it is done in t8code leads to hanging nodes. Numerical methods have to  
85 specifically handle these non-conforming interfaces. Finite-Volume schemes or Discontinuous  
86 Galerkin methods naturally treat this problem via so-called mortar methods. In the future, it  
87 is planned to also support hanging nodes resolving routines by inserting transition elements  
88 conformally connecting elements at different refinement levels.



**Figure 2:** Left: Exemplary t8code forest mesh consisting of two trees (k0, k1) distributed over three parallel processes p0 to p2. The SFC is represented by a black curve tracing only the finest elements (leaves) of each tree. Right: Sketch of the associated mixed shape (a triangle and a quad) mesh refined up to level three.

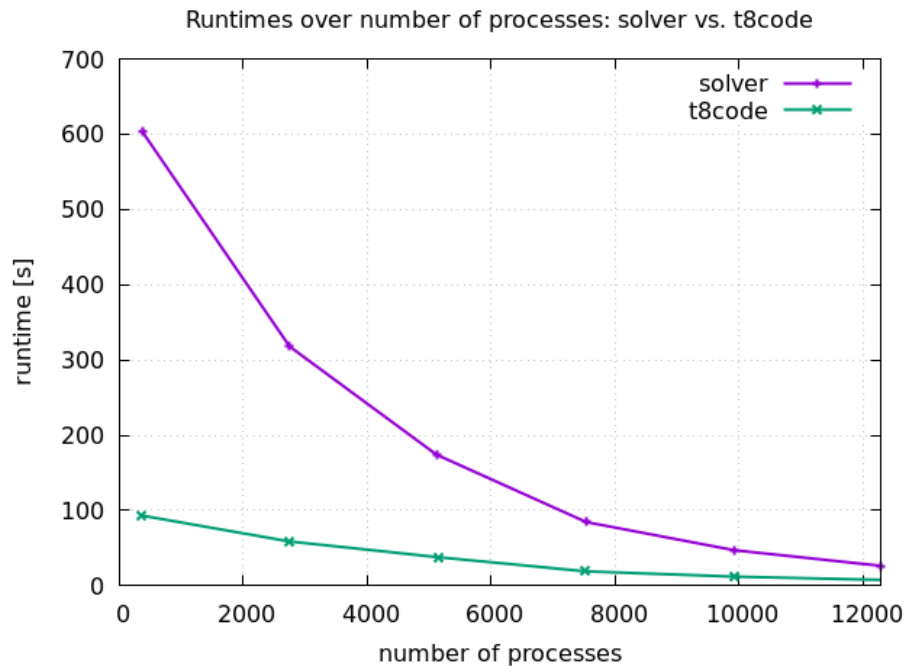
## 89 Performance

90 t8code supports distributed coarse meshes of arbitrary size and complexity, which we tested  
91 for up to 370 million coarse mesh cells ([Burstedde & Holke, 2017](#)). Moreover, we conducted  
92 various performance studies on the JUQUEEN and the JUWELS supercomputers at the Jülich  
93 Supercomputing Center. In [Table 1](#), ([Holke et al., 2021](#)) we show that t8code's ghost routine  
94 is exceptionally fast with proper scaling of up to 1.1 trillion mesh elements. Computing ghost  
95 layers around parallel domains is usually the most expensive of all mesh operation. Furthermore,  
96 in a prototype code ([Dreyer, 2021](#)) implementing a high-order discontinuous Galerkin method  
97 (DG) for advection-diffusion equations on dynamically adaptive hexahedral meshes we can  
98 report of a 12 times speed-up compared to non-AMR meshes with only an overall 15% runtime  
99 contribution of t8code. In [fig. Figure 3](#) we compare the runtimes over number of processes of  
100 the DG solver and the summed mesh operations done by t8code which are ghost computation,  
101 ghost data exchange, partitioning (load balancing), refinement and coarsening as well as  
102 balancing ensuring only a difference of one refinement level among element's face neighbors.  
103 Additionally, from the graph we see the weak scaling property of the application, i.e. the  
104 runtime halves when doubling the number of processes.

# Process	# Elements	# Elem. / process	Ghost
49,152	1,099,511,627,776	22,369,621	2.08 s
98,304	1,099,511,627,776	11,184,811	1.43 s

# Process	# Elements	# Elem. / process	Ghost
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Table 1: Runtimes on JUQUEEN for the ghost layer computation for a distributed mesh consisting of 1.1 trillion elements.



**Figure 3:** Runtimes on JUQUEEN of the solver and summed mesh operations of our DG prototype code coupled with t8code. Mesh operations are ghost computation, ghost data exchange, partitioning (load balancing), refinement and coarsening as well as balancing (max. difference of one level of refinement of neighboring elements). t8code only takes around 15% of the overall runtime. Additionally, we see the weak scaling property of the application, i.e. the runtime halves when doubling the number of processes.

Research Projects

Even though t8code is a newcomer to the market, it is already in use as the mesh management backend in various research projects, most notably in the earth system modeling (ESM) community. In the ADAPTEX project t8code is integrated with the Trixi framework (Schlottke-Lakemper et al., 2020) - a modern computational fluid dynamics code written in Julia. Over the next years several ESM applications are planned to couple to this combination, including MESSy, MPTrac, and SERGHEI. Moreover, t8code also plays an important role in several DLR funded research projects, e.g., VisPlore (massive data visualization), HYTAZER (hydrogen tank certification), and Greenstars (additive rocket engine manufacturing).

Further Information

For further information beyond this short note and also for code examples, we refer to our Documentation and Wiki reachable via our homepage dlr-amr.github.io/t8code and our technical publications on t8code (Becker, 2021; Burstedde & Holke, 2016, 2017; Dreyer, 2021; Elswijker, 2021, 2022; Fußbroich, 2023; Holke, 2018; Holke et al., 2021, 2022; Knapp, 2020; Lilikakis, 2022).

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The authors state that there are no conflicts of interest.

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